Sachchidanand Sinha's work is a reminder of what the Republic of India is. We must cherish it

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Sachchidanand Sinha | Photo Credit: Special Arrangement

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Have you heard about Sachchidanand Sinha? I bet not. If you have, I guess it's one of his namesakes, perhaps the famous member of the Constituent Assembly, or Jayaprakash Narayan's secretary or an academic, but not the one I am talking about. Google search won't yield much on him except for one thoughtful profile and a bland listing of his books or their Amazon links.

You should know him. At 93, he is a bridge between two centuries, someone who brings lessons of the 20th-century ideological debates to our times. Over the last five decades, he has published more than two dozen books, about a dozen in English and more in Hindi. His oeuvre ranges from contemporary politics to aesthetics, from understanding Bihar's underdevelopment to tracing the origins of the caste system, from critiquing the ideological foundations of the Naxalite movement to writing a manifesto for socialism for our

generation. The publication of his eight-volume *rachnavali* (Selected Works) in Hindi last month is a good occasion to (re)read him.

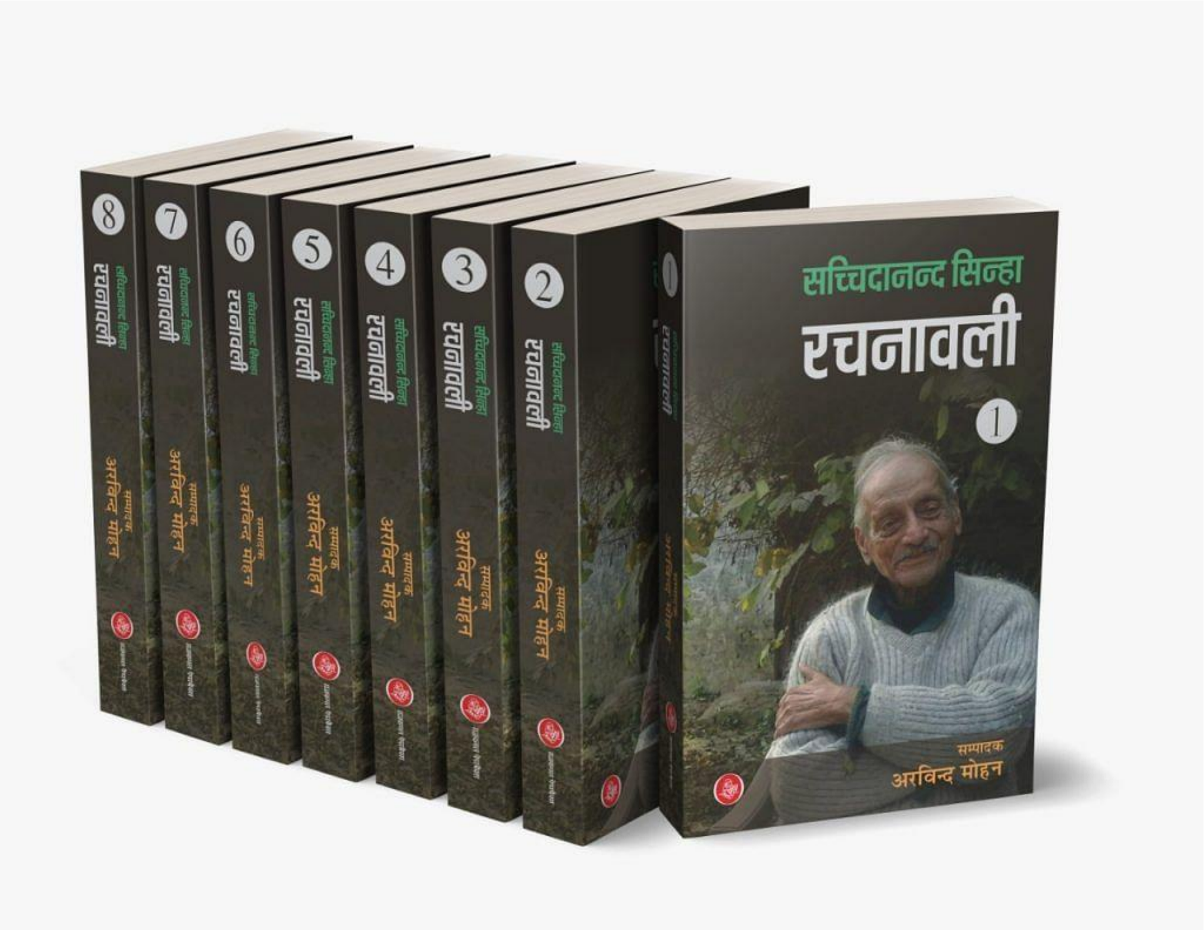
If you don't know him, it's hardly your fault. Sachchidanand Sinha has no academic credentials, not even a bachelor's degree. He has never worked in any academic institution. A political activist all his life — first with the Socialist Party, and then with Samata Sangathan and Samajwadi Jan Parishad — he chose reading and writing as his principal arena of political action. Just as he stayed away from big parties and ideological orthodoxies, he also stayed away from big publishers. Self-effacing to a fault, Sinha has spent the last 35 years in a modest cottage in a Bihar village. His prose is as sparse as his life: no academic jargon, no fashionable lingo, no catchphrases, no stunning one-liners, no stylised provocation. He has turned down awards. In a world where the worth of ideas is determined mainly by external markers, Sachchidanand Sinha is content to remain in oblivion.

Learning from Sachchida*ji*

I was plain lucky to know 'Sachchida-*ji*'. I saw him around 1981 at one of the post-dinner talks at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) organised by the Samata Yuvjan Sabha (SYS), a youth organisation with Gandhian Socialist leaning that I belonged to. I don't remember the topic, but recall how I was drawn to his intellect: clear logical reasoning, backed with solid knowledge sans any rhetorical flourish. Just like my father.

Over the next decade, I attended many study circles and camps where he educated the young cadre of Samata Sangathan on wide-ranging issues, from the most recent political events to the most abstract ideological and philosophical debates. Learning from him (as well as Kishen Pattnayak and Ashok Seksaria) was a privilege that I did nothing to deserve. I remember visiting his bare one-room tenement in Saket, New Delhi that seemed too big for his worldly possessions: a cot, a table and a kerosene stove that served as his kitchen. Sachchida*ji* was, and has remained, an ascetic.

His single-minded pursuit of ideas, unmindful of ideological orthodoxies and academic fashions, allows him to chart through the ideological contestations that marked the 20th century. He is not a non-aligned spectator. He has been, and continues to be, a socialist. But his socialism is not a creed tied to a sacred book or a supreme leader. It helps that he comes from an unorthodox sub-stream of Indian socialism associated with Jayaprakash Narayan, Narendra Deva and Rammanohar Lohia. At the same time, Sachchida*ji* is not a 'Lohiaite' and has nothing but contempt for what passes for socialist politics in today's India.



Selected Works of Sachchidanand Sinha | Author

Beyond political ideologies

In his first major book, *Socialism and Power*, Sachchida*ji* continued this interrogation of the received socialist orthodoxy. While he is more deferential to Karl Marx than most of his colleagues, he critiques Marx and Marxists for their blind faith in big industry, megacities and capital-intensive technology. This was not a recipe for revolution, but for a concentration of economic and political power that resulted in the collapse of the USSR and the rise of state-capitalism in China.

His book, *Poonji Ka Antim Adhyay*, extends Marx's magnum opus, *Das Kapital*, to its unwritten fourth volume. The political

activist in him cannot leave things at a critique. His *Socialism: A Manifesto for Survival* offers an outline of socialism for our age. In his version — decentralised democracy, appropriate technology, non-consumerist standards of living, ecological sustainability and primacy of labour over capital — socialism does not remain just one of the ideologies from the 20th century but becomes a synthesis of all that is worth learning from that century.

His unique gaze extends beyond the limited world of political ideologies. In *The Caste System: Myth and Reality*, he counters the orientalist reading of scripturally sanctioned, ever-unchanging caste order. One of his first books, *Internal Colony*, questioned the established economic wisdom to argue that the backwardness of states like Bihar (which included Jharkhand then) draws upon the logic of capitalist development that must suck resources from 'internal colonies'. In the hay days of Congress monopoly and defying proponents of the two-party democracy, he postulated that a coalition is the most appropriate form of power-sharing in a democracy like India. Unlike most political activists, he does not view art as an instrument of propaganda. His writings on aesthetics establish art as a means to contain human impulses for violence.

The problem is with us

In a world of ideas dominated by academic experts, Sachchidanad Sinha would be seen as an interloper, an amateur generalist. The problem lies not with him, but with us. He is among the last surviving species of a great tradition of modern Indian social and political thinkers that began in the 19th century. For the next 150

years or so, this intellectual effervescence and contestation laid the foundations of the Republic of India.

Unlike Europe, social and political thinking in India was not happening in universities or academic institutions. Our thinkers were practitioners, mostly social and political activists themselves. They asked big questions and provided bold answers. Anchored in our context, they engaged with the modern world on our own terms, mostly using Indian languages.

This tradition suffered a sudden death soon after Independence. Social and political theorising was taken over by experts in social sciences and humanities who looked up to and hoped to engage with their western counterparts. Not to put too fine a point, this transition has been a disaster for India – from our perspective to policy and politics. After the death of Rammanohar Lohia, the last great thinker in that tradition, in 1967 it is hard to name many Indian thinkers outside the academia who helped us connect with the big questions of our times. I can only think of Kishen Pattanayak, Dharampal, R. P. Saraf and, of course, Sachchida*ji*.

Sachchidanand Sinha reminds us of what we have lost and need to regain if we wish to reclaim our republic.